Luke 4:14-30

Meditation
Ash Wednesday
Defense Construction Supply Depot
March 3, 1976

John M Buchanan

Lent is not what it used to be. There was a time, not so very long ago, at least in the area of Pennsylvania that was home for me, when Lent had some substance. For Church people, it was a time for buckling down and doing some things we didn't do ordinarily. In my home it meant going to Church every Wednesday night - not an altogether attractive prospect for a young boy far more interested in playing basketball. But we went, and I suffered through all those Wednesday nights, and if my life depended on it I could not now tell you one thing the preacher had to say in one of those many, many sermons.

What came through to me in that experience - besides the tedium and time lost from the basketball court - was a sense that something important was happening, or was about to happen: and that somehow the good news of Easter morning was related to those difficult hours in the pew on Wednesday evening. And, in retrospect, I am convinced that the experience was helpful to me: I learned, in spite of myself, that at the heart of the Christian message is a very costly sacrifice: and that people who plan to celebrate and observe anything on Easter morning had better come to terms with that - or the whole thing will be a silly charade. - Colors, eggs, daffodils, new clothes. -

All that by way of saying I'm glad to be here sharing this experience with you - on a day that retains a lot of importance to me - Ash Wednesday - a day of buckling down for Christian people of all denominations. And I invite you to think with me about Lent - as a time when we move from the abstract to the specific: from the theoretical to the concrete.

Everyone of us lives by a set of abstractions - Sometimes we never come to grips with the practical, concrete meaning of these ~~abstractions~~ grand ideas. Let me illustrate ..

Good speed

JESUS CHRIST FOR MODERN MAN
TEACHER
Matthew 5:1-12

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Columbus, Ohio

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Men knew him first as Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus bar Joseph, son of a carpenter: they knew him as a man. It was not long, however, until they confronted in him a teacher. Fifty times in the Gospels he is addressed with words the only good translation of which is teacher. Even his opponents conceded that and addressed him in the same way. Today, people who are not particularly interested in theological assertions about him remain intrigued by what he taught. [illegible]

My starting point is that we exist as a church because of a story about a man who lived and died and rose again; a story we have discovered makes all the difference in the world to us: a story we want to tell to the world. My starting point is also based on an observation made very recently by sociologists of religion, that the institutional church, in its frantic attempt to be relevant within the social and economic and political chaos of the past decade has, in fact, become somewhat irrelevant. Put another way, the relevance we wanted, having been demonstrated, still feels irrelevant. People - in and outside of the institutional church want to know the story. Again, this is not to say that the church should withdraw from its mission commitments to the world with all the complexity and risk and potential unpopularity that implies. It is simply to assert

that we first need to know the story: that we need, occasionally, to reacquaint ourselves with the story and the staggering impact it can have when it is told and heard honestly, without embellishment. Thus, in Lent, a series of sermons on Jesus Christ for Modern Man.

We thought last week about The Man. We looked at the doctrine of the incarnation in classic terms: ~~Jesus was fully God and fully man.~~ We focused on the paradoxical claim of Christian Faith that Jesus was our brother, like us in every way. ~~We thought about the claim that his humanity was not a cloak which he could shed whenever it became inconvenient; that he was limited by his humanity: that he loved his life and that when he died he died in the literal, actual meaning of the word.~~

It is helpful to remember that his followers, the disciples, did not attach theological significance to his life until after Easter. They did not become Christians as a result of a well-reasoned theological treatise. They saw and responded to a man and what they found in him immediately was a teacher. So did an apparently increasing number of people in the three years between 30 and 33 AD, referred to in the New Testament, as simply "the crowds." People - the crowds - listened and followed him in order to listen some more. Wherever he went people gathered to hear what he had to say. So, this morning, we look carefully at Jesus the Teacher.

What makes a great teacher? For the amusement of it I counted the number of teachers I have sat under and concluded that the total is well in excess of two hundred. I remember some of them vividly. I remember some of them not at all. And while my collegues in education

might challenge my categories I have concluded that the teachers I remember, the ones I am consciously aware of having taught me, had three particular qualities. Knowledge of the subject they were teaching: an ability to communicate which included both flexibility and obvious personal concern for the student: and authority. Now, authority comes in a number of packages. It can be and is taken by coercion: authority accrues to a person with superior strength. In the case of a teacher it is the authority based on the power to give a failing grade, or to eject a student from the class, or to inflict physical punishment. But there is another authority - a better kind of authority in the context of a free society. It is the authority which is granted by the citizen or the student. It is not coerced: rather it is based on the intrinsic authenticity of the teacher. As I tried to think objectively about my own experience, there was a significant moment in my relationship with the teach. I remember, when authority changed from one type to the other: when, in essence, I consented to be taught. Then learning happened. Authority - Ability to Communicate - Knowledge of the subject - Jesus the teacher.

He knew what he was talking about. That point is so obvious from a superficial reading of the accounts that we don't need to spend much time on it. Jesus was obviously schooled in Rabbinic thought. As was the case with all young men, he had attended Synagogue classes: he had learned how to use the Hebrew language even though he spoke Aramaic. He knew the law - Torah - and the prophets. In debate he could quote the scripture and he knew which texts were more authoritative. It is not evident to the casual reader of the New Testament but when Jesus was in the wilderness and Satan tempted him by quoting scripture, Jesus answered each thrust with another quote - in each case a text that had

more authority within the context of the Rabbinic thought of the time. Even the people who were opposed to him acknowledged that he knew his subject.

He could communicate. That rare ability included flexibility, for he taught not only in the formal setting of the Synagogue, but from a mountain top, and at table, and in the market place and from the prow of a fishing boat. He drew from a wide range of literary techniques which when looked at objectively are amazing. Consider a few. He apparently could coin a phrase that was literally unforgetable. ("What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?") Several years ago there was great consternation over the apparent triviality of the contemporary pulpit. Someone took a survey that we preachers would like to forget. The purpose was to determine how much of a sermon is retained by a congregation. The findings were that generally by Sunday night no one could remember a specific sentence: by mid week very few could remember a general idea: and by the following week almost no one remembered the subject. Even given the possibility of additions and editorial corrections over the centuries, Jesus was apparently a master at turning a phrase that could be remembered.

He used as a teaching technique the presentation of an ~~"thought-provoking paradox",~~ the idea that sounds incredible, but that will not be dismissed because of the suspicion that it may, after all, be true. ["Blessed are the poor in spirit?"] "Blessed" is more accurately translated "How happy are those" - ["How happy are the peace makers - the mourners - How happy are you when you are persecuted?"] One New Testament scholar has suggested that if we could hear the Beatitudes as if for the first time they would literally take our breath away.

He could be abrupt, shocking, vulgar: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away." He could be satirical, humorous: he told a story about a man with a two by four in his eye trying to remove a speck of dust from another man's eye - the first century equivalent of that modern ~~standard~~ gag about a neuro-surgeon with shaking hands.

He could be gentle, taking a child on his lap and telling about the simplicity of faith. And he could tell stories - stories so vividly expresive that their titles are almost sufficient - "The Good Samaritan", "The Prodigal Son", "The Lost Sheep". (Much of this material is found in William Barclay, The Mind of Christ, Chapter 10)

~~All of that is interesting, but~~ What has always intrigued me about Jesus the rabbi, however, ~~been intriguing to me~~ are those hints and references in the New Testament to the effect that he had authority. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount we read, "the crowds were astonished by his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." The same statement, including the reference to the scribes, is found in Mark 1:22. ~~And in John 7 there is a particularly fascinating account of the Temple guard, having been sent to arrest Jesus and returning empty handed, when the chief priests and Pharisees inquire, the guards answer, "No one ever spoke like this man!" And the Pharisees respond, "Have any of the authorities believed in him?"~~

Where did he get his authority? What did the crowds see in him? He certainly had no official credentials: he was merely a carpenter, from Nazareth - of all places. Whatever it was, it stood out in stark contrast to the scribes.

The Scribes were the teachers: the official teachers. They were schooled in teaching the law - Torah - the first five books in the Old

Testament and the body of commentary that had accumulated over the centuries. They knew all the rules: they knew the exceptions to the rules and the exceptions to the exceptions. They knew who had said what about which. They belonged to various schools: and they taught by referring to the authoritative Scribes from their particular school. When they taught a point of law - or when they were called on to interpret a dispute about a particularly fine point of law, they referred to the past wisdom of others.

In sharp contrast Jesus, apparently, did not do that. He did not refer to anyone else when he taught. In fact, when he did, it only made the contrast between the Scribes and himself sharper. "You have heard that it was said" - that is, by the Scribes - "but I say to you." That was new: it was infuriating to the scribes themselves and to the rest of the religious establishment. Who did he think he was? The crowds loved it. For them - he had authority,

I came home from Divinity School one summer and preached a sermon in my home Church for the first time. I was extremely careful to cite every"authority" I knew on the subject, and to demonstrate what I thought at that time was important to demonstrate - namely that I had been doing a lot of reading and had become very wise. Later, over lunch, my father taught me about authority. He said, "You told us what Karl Barth and PaulTillich and Reinhold ~~Niehbuhr~~ Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought, but I don't think you ever got around to telling us what you thought."

The crowds were astonished at what he said, because he assumed for himself the authority which, over the centuries, had been reserved for the Scribes ~~of the teacher~~. ~~They consented to that authority~~ and the religious tradition they represented. ~~of the teacher~~. ~~They~~ The crowds consented to ~~that~~ his authority because they could see in him the integrity and the authenticity of what he was teaching.

And yet there is more even than that . .

They knew that he cared about them, and they could see and sense that somehow, for them, he was living out the implications of his teaching. He was not simply discussing an ethical ideal - he was doing it. He was not simply discussing the potential implications of loving an enemy - he was on the way to actually doing it. - He was becoming what he was teaching.

They consented to be taught because this man cared about them. "Them" in the New Testament is the "Crowd", an unfortunately neutral word. In Aramaic - and the later Greek - the word is far better translated "riff-raff": if I may refer to one of my authoritis - a New Testament professor who translated it bluntly - "the bums". No one cared about them, least of all the religious officials. The Pharisees, custodians of the law, drew their robes tightly in order to avoid contaminating, physical contact with these people - the crowd. Equally, the crowd laughed at the pomposity of the righteous Pharisees. He had no authority for them at all. But this man cared, and they listened to him gladly because he cared - a point Christians must learn before we presume to tell anyone how to live.

Jesus was a teacher - and we need to see him in that light. But he was more than that. Xtians have always sensed that the man can not be separated from what he taught - and so it is never adequate simply to regard him as a proponent of a new body of religious rules. In fact, the very content of what he taught - pushes beyond an academic inquiry - and we find that we must take him seriously -

Consider, briefly - two general directions - in his teaching.

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was present in the life of the world in him: not in the future - not after death - not beside but separate from

the life of the world: but not in it as leavening is in bread. The Kingdom of God exists, he taught, when God reigns - and God reigns when men and women do his will. His teaching is not a new law: it is not a new legal code to replace the law of Moses. Jesus was, and remained a Jew. And while he respected the Holy Law of Judaism he said simply that ~~God's~~ Kingdom righteousness means more than obeying the law. That was radical and revolutionary when he taught it, and Christian people have found it radical when they have thought about it for very long ever since.

Jesus taught that is was God's will that men not only refrain from committing perjury but that they tell the truth. He taught that it is God's will that men not only refrain from killing each other but that they stop hating each other. Jesus taught that righteousness, in God's Kingdom, is not simply a matter of refraining from doing all the prohibited, forbidden acts, but in positively doing something that no law can prescribe. In God's Kingdom, for instance, it is not enough to refrain from attacking and stealing from your neighbor: you are to stop what you are doing when you find him lying in a ditch and bind up his wounds. In God's Kingdom, you not only carry another man's load the mile the law prescribes, you go along another mile on your own volition. In God's Kingdom, here, you not only obey the law, go to Church on Sunday, and live a proper life, you help and heal and love people you don't have to and who don't know you and may not even like you.

The Kingdom of God, Jesus taught, is here when men and women reflect, in their lives, the will of God. Now, men have despaired at that. When they have regarded the teaching of Jesus as a new law they have invariably thrown up their hands in frustration. How is it possible, for instance, not to feel anger? Emil Brunner once remarked that Jesus made every man a murderer and an adulterer - when he equated anger and lust with the

actual crimes. When a man once told Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, that he could accept Jesus as teacher but not Lord, Kierkegaard simply invited the man to try to live those teachings. In fact, if Jesus taught a new system of ethics and if, in fact, he is the judge of our performance, we are in rather serious trouble.

But Jesus also taught about God.

~~The second general direction of his teaching was about God.~~ A God who is a righteous judge but who is also a loving father. A God who understands when his children stumble and fall: a God who places strenuous demands on his children, but whose forgiveness can pick a person back up and give him the grace and courage to try again.

Jesus taught about a God who wants us to obey his will: to live better, kindlier lives, to be more generous, more loving, more courageous, more joyful than any of us is. He taught about a God whose incredible love for us compells us to keep trying, not because we're afraid of what will happen if we don't; not because our egos need boosting by self-acheived goodness, but because his love for us is so great that we have no other alternative. Jesus died - demonstrating that redeeming love. The teacher became the Savior of the cross.

of the ~~Sermon on the Mount~~ Sermon on the Mount

Jesus taught that God reigns now. And that when you and I learn from him and obey his will, we are privileged to usher in a bit of God's and experience Kingdom ~~here~~ on earth.

"The crowds were astonished because he taught them with authority." Time has not changed that. Still - he teaches us. ~~He did and he does~~ Amen.

Father, we would learn at the feet of the master. Help us to hear as if for the first time. Amen.